

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN CANADA

brief submitted to the
Royal Commission by the
League for Socialist Action/
Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière

10 cents



'NOW, MOTHER, YOUR CHILD IS PERFECTLY SAFE--FROM POLIO

The Status of Women in Canada

**Brief submitted to the government's Royal Commission on the Status of Women,
from the League for Socialist Action/Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière – April 1968**

As an organization seriously concerned about *all* problems concerning the people of Canada, the League for Socialist Action / La Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière welcomes the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission, in the questionnaires it has circulated, has asked some pertinent questions regarding Canadian women and the law. But while an examination of the law is both revealing and necessary, it is our opinion that the problem of women's status, which is that of an inferior in all respects, lies deeply below the surface of society and involves fundamental aspects of the economic and social structure.

In Canada we have developed our natural resources on such a scale as to clearly demonstrate the real possibility of liberating all sections of the population from social and economic insecurity. But if men are not yet free – woman is less free because she is further enslaved by her sex. We maintain that the attitudes and prejudices both reflected in and sustained in law and custom that tie woman to what has been called a second class citizenship, are embedded in the very foundations of present day society and that a fundamental change in this society will be required to eradicate them.

The situation confronting women in Canada — a developed industrial society — demonstrates all the more clearly the profound character of the problem. The high standard of living, advancing birth control techniques, extensive legal rights, access to all levels of education — all these have contributed towards the emancipation of woman and have helped free her from the hardships that have traditionally burdened her down.

Contradictions

But what is the real situation? — technology has rendered housework almost obsolete. But despite the fact that more and more married women are entering the labor market (1) large numbers continue to function almost entirely outside the social mainstream, tied by a thousand threads to the maintenance of the home — women have the *right* to vote, to run for public office, to own property. Yet the political and economic life of the country remains dominated by a minority of men – the federal government has recognized the concept of equal pay for equal work. Yet in some provinces the law actually condones wage inequality between men and women. Even where equal pay legislation is on the

books, women receive substantially lower wages for doing the same work as men.(2) While the trade union movement is in the forefront of this struggle, it has not yet won it – it is conceded that women and men have equal mental capacities. Yet early in the school years, women are systematically streamed out of the analytical subjects and channeled into less creative, less prestigious and less rewarding areas.(3) — women have the right to higher education and to work in the professions. Yet the number of women who actually graduate from college is far lower than men, and with the exception of nursing, librarianship and teaching, women compose less than 10 percent (as low as 3 percent in some) of the main professions in Canada.(4) Even in those professions where women are the majority, men hold nearly all the key positions — advancing birth control techniques give women increasing control over their bodies. Yet thousands of unwanted babies continue to be born and many illegal abortions are performed at great risk and loss of life.

What Must Be Done?

These contradictions point to the fact that woman's inferior position in society, is not merely a result of custom or law, but is deeply rooted in the existing social and economic order which they sustain. How are we to solve these problems? The implementation by the government of the following program would constitute the first necessary steps to allow woman to take her place as an equal partner in society.

1) *Women must be freed from her traditional responsibilities for the child* — the child has the right to everything that society can provide, regardless of the resources of the parents. Parents should not be burdened with providing for the child but every facility should be available for the full development of the child. A far teaching system of government-financed facilities including nursery schools and day care centers must be established. In this way those women who prefer employment outside the home would be able to seek it. Those who prefer to be homemakers should receive a wage from the state. The family, through the imposition on its slender resources of the responsibilities of society as a whole, has taken on many of the forms of a prison. With the implementation of these propositions, the family could freely evolve into a harmonious relationship between human beings.

Birth Control, Abortion

2) *Woman must have complete control of her body* —the government must initiate a widespread educational campaign on birth control and establish community birth control centers for the dissemination and distribution of birth control information and devices. Both of these projects should be financed by the government. Any and all restrictions on the right of women to determine whether or not to bear a child should be removed.

3) *Special measures must be taken to ensure that women benefit fully from the educational system* – all educational fees must be abolished and an income provided for students adequate to meet their essential needs while attending school – all educational institutions must be co-educational — all classes must be co-educational, with the

presently all-female home economics courses dropped and substituted with a general living course which would equip both girls and boys to take care of themselves — women should be given special encouragement in the analytical fields, such as math and sciences, in order to compensate for the social prejudices which now exist and which discourage them from developing their individual abilities in these areas.

Write Women Back Into History!

School text books should be completely rewritten to exclude sex discrimination. Women must be written back into history! Not only are fundamental questions about the changing role of women through the ages still unexplored, but it is only recently that a start has been made in straightening out the slanders against the feminists(5) – it is only lately that we have learned of great and brave women who fought along with men for social progress in the past. How many more valiant women are buried in history? Would not women today be inspired to hear of them! A retelling of history would banish forever the myth of feminine inferiority!

4) *All barriers excluding women from equality in the area of work must be removed* – the minimum wage must be the same for women and men in all provinces – sex discrimination in job classification must be eliminated – all employers must be required by law to grant generous maternity leave with full pay.

While implementation of these demands would not secure full equality for women, it would pave the way towards this objective.

But why haven't even these requirements for woman's emancipation been achieved? And why do women appear not to have taken advantage of the opportunities that presently exist? *There are two standard answers that are given. One is that woman's "nature" is such that she is incapable of rising to a state of equality with men. The other (our answer) is that class society has enslaved woman and continues to do so to this day through capitalist society.*

The Myth of Woman's Inferiority

It has often been stated that women are predestined by their biological make-up to center their lives around child rearing and the home. Biology equals destiny. This view holds that both woman's intellect and psychology are affected and conditioned by her maternal role. "Women are not necessarily inferior to men. They are just different." This view maintains that the beautiful qualities of femininity, "receiving, keeping and nourishing" (6) are contained only in woman and must not be sacrificed by woman taking on other roles. Woman is presented as a unique and mysterious creature. This is a most beguiling presentation of the myth of feminine inferiority, one that at the same time enshrines and debases her. This view argues that woman not be legally discriminated against, only condemned forever to her special role. These concepts are nothing but a

rationalization of the situation that now prevails — and there is no truth in them.(7) We reject these pronouncements based on some timeless concept of the essential “nature” of man and woman. It is not woman’s “nature” that has placed man at the pivotal position in present day society.

There was an extensive period in human history of far greater duration than what is known as western civilization when society revolved around woman, not man. We are led to accept the idea that woman has always been the “second sex.” The role of woman in primitive times has been hidden from us. This is the period in social and productive relations known as the matriarchy. It was woman who invented agriculture, tool-making and architecture, who first domesticated animals, while primitive man, who spent prolonged periods on the hunt, was isolated from the community. This period, which stretched over hundreds of thousands of years, came to an end, not due to any belated resurgence of an essential “nature”(8) of woman but due to the development of class society.

What Determines Woman’s Status?

It was only with vast changes in social productive relations that woman’s role in society changed. An examination of the varied role woman has played in history shows that it is the social productive relations and her relation to them that determined woman’s social rule and position. From the matriarchy — the social relations of primitive communist society – has evolved what we know today as capitalism. Here too the social forces determine woman’s role. The main feature of this society is the private ownership of the means of production and their utilization solely for the profit of those owning them. An appreciation of this is vitally important to the understanding of the present situation of woman.

Woman has been relegated to the role of raising and training the next generation of workers, and on occasion, when required, has been thrust directly into the work force herself. Woman has been shunted on and off the labor market to meet the needs of an unplanned and profit motivated economy.

During World War II women’s services were required to keep up wartime production. The way was opened for them to enter the work force. Nursery schools and day care centers were built. All the traditional myths and concepts about the duties of woman were shoved aside. The first responsibility of woman was to leave the home, put children aside, and assume the role that heretofore had been declared the domain of man. A new atmosphere was created which showed itself everywhere in popular magazines and advertisements. These featured spirited and independent women with different dress, different hairstyles, and a different psychology. This process came to an abrupt halt with the close of the war when her services were no longer required and an atmosphere was generated to reverse it.(9)

Capitalism the Source of Inequality

This incredible reversal within a decade shows that woman's role in this society — capitalist society — is determined by the needs of this society, i.e., the interests of the dominant class in this society, the capitalists, and not the interests of the great majority, the working class, both male and female.

The implementation of the propositions advanced in the first part of our presentation — complete freedom for a woman to decide whether or not to bear a child — wages for homemakers — community responsibility for children, etc. — these would vastly improve woman's position in present-day Canadian society. But their chief significance lies not in the establishment of this or that individual right. At best they lay the foundations from which the whole struggle to free womankind can move forward.

We have referred to the experience of the World War II and post-World War II years in Canada. The experience of German women — under the post-World War I regime where they made great gains only to have them brutally wiped out overnight under the fascist dictatorship of Hitler with its "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" is also worth noting.

Full Partnership — Under Socialism

As long as capitalist society prevails whatever gains woman establishes, in material form and in status, are always tentative and in jeopardy. The implementation of these proposals would represent a marked advance towards removing capitalism, the social and productive basis of woman's subjugation; and at the same time take us forward to the establishment of a new society — socialism.

Woman is victimized both on account of her sex and her state as a worker. Hence she is doubly oppressed. Woman must seek a society that knows no inequalities of sex, race, or class. Equality for woman — free partnership with man — cannot be found in an unjust and exploitative society. It can only be found in a society where the great productive forces created by our collective effort are at the full disposal of humanity, where the economy is planned to meet human need and where production is geared for human use — in a socialist society.

Footnotes

1. Women's Bureau, Department of Labor, *Changing Patterns in Women's Employment*. P. 6, table 1 , p.7.

2. *Chatelaine*, January, 1968. "The Royal Commission on the Status of Women: Will It Do Any Good?"

3. Paul Herst, *A Commentary on the Motivation and Education of College Women*. National Association of Women Deans and Counselors Journal, Jan., 1962, #25, pages 51-59.

4. Department of Labor, *Occupational Trends in Canada 1931-1961*. Report #11; page 57, chart I; page 60, chart 4; page 40, table 4.

5. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. Chapter 4 "The Passionate Journey."

6. Karl Stern. *The Flight From Woman*. Chapters 2 and 3.
7. Eve Merriam, *After Nora Slammed the Door*, Part IV, "Sex and Semantics," pages 216-218.
8. Robert Briffault, *The Mothers*.
9. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. "The Happy Housewife Heroine," pages 32-35.

Some Key Reading on the Situation of Women

by Ruth Blake (*Ruth Tate – Ed.*)

One of the many injustices women share with oppressed minorities is the constant distortion not only of their history, but of their abilities – biological, intellectual and social. Lack of reliable information, as well as the abundance of debasing images and half-truths will be a problem for women who want to prepare a case for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

No doubt it is in recognition of this that the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor has recently published a 42-page bibliography of material relevant to the Royal Commission. This most useful and thorough list can be obtained from the Department of Labor. Meanwhile, here is an outline of a few of the books and articles that have been useful in the preparation of the brief, and which help present a clearer picture of the historical, social and economic roles of woman.

Two fundamental aspects of woman's history are her role in pre-history when she was a paramount social force, and the struggle for legal emancipation. For a Marxist analysis of the matriarchy, the subsequent shift in property relations and to male dominance, the basic work is *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* by Frederick Engels, the close associate of Karl Marx; while *The Mothers* by Robert Briffault gives a vivid and detailed portrait of this period.

As far as women's suffrage is concerned, Catherine Cleverdon's *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* seems to be the only book available to Canadian women on this vital part of their past, and this is unfortunate. While there is no doubt that equal property laws and the vote were attained with relative ease by Canadian women (usually inspired by the dynamism of events in the United States and largely won, with the exception of Quebec, by the early 1900s), the author's coy style, her referrals to "hardships and heartaches" and her many reassurances that Canadians decried the "violence" of the British and American struggles makes uninspired reading. Surely it was not all tea parties and petitions?

American Suffrage Movement

In contrast to this, in form as well as content, some excellent books have recently appeared on the American suffrage movement. *Woman's Rights* by Eleanor Coolridge is a brief, but very moving picture of the important American feminists, excellent as an

introduction; Eleanor Flexer's *Century of Struggle* is far more political and thorough, with emphasis, for the first time, on the part played by labor and black women. Both books make it clear that the battle for woman's rights ebbed and flowed with the tides of other forms of social protest, like the abolition movement, although the two were far from always being in harmony. It is not unusual, then, with the world today in turmoil, that woman should begin, after a long silence, to be concerned about her status. The appearance of these books is an indication of the rising consciousness.

On Woman's Role

On general questions of woman's "nature" and role, Margaret Mead's famous *Male and Female* is useful. For although the famous anthropologist draws incorrect conclusions, as Betty Friedman points out in *The Feminine Mystique*, the data Mead gives on the multiplicity of roles played by women in the various tribes she studied points in another direction. Concerning maternity, Alice K. Rossi in her article "Equality between the sexes" (*Women in America*, editor Lifton) shows that the American mother's exclusive attention to her children is a historical first. She then powerfully documents the case against full time motherhood.

When the time comes to get down to specific situations, Canadian women can arm themselves well with evidence of their unequal state with statistics, charts and tables provided in concise form by the Canadian Department of Labor. The pamphlets *Women at Work in Canada* (1964) and *Occupational Trends in Canada, 1931-61* can be bought for less than a dollar and graphically demonstrate that Canadian women are consistently paid unequal wages in low paying, low prestige work, and that little to no advance has been made in the professions by women.

With these facts at her disposal, and with the correct analytical tools, woman should be able to swim against the tide of misinformation that seeks to keep her in her place.

***Woman must have complete control of her body. Birth control devices and information freely available to all. The removal of all restrictions on abortion.**

***Special measures to ensure that women have complete access to education. Abolition of fees and an income provided to students; universal co-education; special encouragement in analytical fields. Write woman back into history.**

***For a family that is a harmonious relationship between human beings. Free educational facilities for children from birth to maturity. This would permit women to seek employment outside the home. A state wage for those who choose to be homemakers.**

***For complete equality of women at work.**

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